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Ilhan Omar: If Democrats want to win, focus on nonvoters



Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) argues that the Democratic Party needs to present policies that appeal to nonvoters who do not feel either party represents them. (Video: Joy Sharon Yi, Kate Woodsome, Danielle Kunitz/Photo: Jose Sanchez / AP/The Washington Post)

Opinion by **Ilhan Omar**

September 25, 2020 at 12:32 p.m. UTC

Ilhan Omar, a Democrat, represents Minnesota in the U.S. House.

President Trump went after me yet again this week: “How about Omar?” he [said](#) at a rally in Pennsylvania. “We’re going to win the state of Minnesota because of her.” He then launched into a xenophobic, false attack implying I wasn’t American. “She’s telling us how to run our country. How did you do where you came from?” he asked the crowd. (For the record, I fled civil war

when I was 8 years old and am a naturalized U.S. citizen who serves our nation in Congress.)

As offensive as his remarks are, I have seen the media and even Democrats fall for his argument. We need to win over former Trump voters, the thinking goes, and we can't do that if we embrace progressive leaders and policies. But while winning swing voters is important, there is a key constituency Democrats need in November that is almost entirely left out of the conversation: nonvoters.

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In 2016, 6 million people who voted for President Barack Obama in 2012 supported Trump. Yet an even greater proportion of Obama supporters — 6.7 million — didn't vote at all or voted for third-party candidates. [Evidence shows](#) these voters are more persuadable than those we lost to Trump. They hold views that are similar to those of consistent Democratic voters and are more likely to support progressive policies.

They're also more likely to be working class, immigrants and people of color. In 2016, just [28 percent](#) of voters had an income under \$30,000, compared with more than half of nonvoters. Of nonvoters, [according to the New York Times](#), 52 percent were non-White, compared with 35 percent of Hillary Clinton voters and just 16 percent of Trump voters.

We've worked to turn out these voters in Minnesota. In my recent primary, we received [more than 100,000 total votes](#) — one of the highest primary-vote totals on record in Minnesota and nationally this cycle. Our district saw more than 37,000 additional voters in 2020 than in 2018, despite the fact that there were no competitive statewide Democratic primaries this year.

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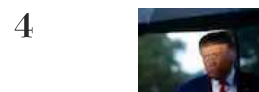
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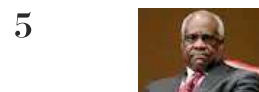
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We didn't do this by targeting only voters we lost in 2018 ([though we did that, too](#)). We did it by targeting young people, immigrants and people who were registered but just hadn't voted in recent elections. Our campaign prioritized field and voter-contact operations, working to talk to as many potential voters as possible, as many times as possible.

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Trump is president now because he [increased](#) Republican turnout [in the Midwest](#) while we Democrats didn't. Just a few-hundred-thousand votes spread between Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio are how he won. In fact, he would have won Minnesota too, had we not worked to increase turnout in the state's 5th Congressional District, much of it from the urban core of Minneapolis.

Democrats across the country should be focusing on the same kind of organizing we've implemented. But it's not enough to have conversations with folks who don't vote; we have to give them a reason to go to the polls.

That's why adopting policies and finding candidates who speak to the needs of working people isn't just the right thing to do, it is critical for our party's long-term success. When we unequivocally challenge corporate influence in our politics, we speak to millions of working people. When we support progressive priorities such as Medicare-for-all or a Green New Deal, we motivate young people. When we support cries for police accountability and field candidates from these movements, we speak to people of color who are most likely to be brutalized by police.

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This includes reexamining foreign policy. Decades of endless wars have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars — money that should be invested in educating our young people, caring for our seniors and housing our homeless.

I get the urge to focus on disaffected Trump voters. Democrats pride themselves on being a big-tent party. We want to show disaffected Republicans that there's a political home for them outside Trump's GOP. But appealing to these voters while alienating more progressive, diverse nonvoters doesn't make sense. For every moderate, suburban Republican on the fence about Trump, there are lines of cooks, homeworkers, dishwashers, cashiers and farm workers who would vote a straight Democratic ticket if they were just given a reason to do so.

My message to my colleagues across the country is simple: Don't listen to Trump. Speak to the people who need us the most. Focus on those who don't have a voice and who will support our boldest and most enduring ideas as a party. Give nonvoters a reason to turn out to vote.

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That's who this party should be for. It's who this party should be talking to. And it's who we should be counting on to build a coalition to defeat Trump in November.

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